Cropsey Farmer Manages Technological Change

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For: Fairbury Blade Newspaper
Date: July 13, 2020

It is always a difficult decision on whether or not to adopt new technology. Some people want the latest and greatest technology, and they are called "early adopters." Usually, the newest technology is relatively expensive, and the product is not fully developed. Other people decide to stretch the old technology as long as possible. They do not purchase new technology until the price has dropped, and the product is fully developed.

Reverend Christian Gerber was born in Ohio in 1848. When Rev. Gerber was 16 years old, his family moved from Ohio to the Morton area in 1864. In 1870, Rev. Gerber married Barbara Roth. Rev. Gerber and Barbara had seven children. Unfortunately, a scarlet fever epidemic took the lives of three of their children.

In 1875, Rev. Gerber and his family moved from Morton to Belle Prairie Township, south of Fairbury. According to Benjamin Nussbaum's South Side Apostolic Christian Church history pamphlet, the original ministers of the South Side church were Rudolph Leuthold, Peter Sommer, Nick Wanner, Henry Ziegenhorn, and Christian Gerber.

In 1910, at the age of 62, Rev. Gerber was working in his hayfield. He was walking and driving the head team of horses hitched to a hay loader. John Hoerr, who was working with the hay loader, noticed the absence of Rev. Gerber. The horse team went by, and Mr. Hoerr saw the horse lines were dragging on the ground. Mr. Hoerr then noticed that Rev. Gerber had fallen to the ground. In just a few more minutes, Rev. Gerber passed away.

One of the sons of Rev. Gerber was Christian Samuel Gerber, born in 1888 in Fairbury. Christian S. Gerber was commonly called Chris Gerber. He grew up on his father's farm in Belle Prairie Township and attended country school. Chris Gerber was 22 years old when his father, the Rev. Chris Gerber, passed away.

In the 1800s, Fairbury area barns were built with a rectangular framed design. When a farmer needed a new barn, local neighbors would hold a "barn raising" day and help to construct the new barn. Timber was readily available in that era, and these barns were built using rugged timber frames.

In the early 1900s, the University of Illinois began promoting round-shaped barns instead of rectangular framed designs. Round barns were built at the Urbana campus to show them to farmers. The University claimed that round barns offered greater convenience in the storing, handling, and distributing of feed to livestock. Round barns were lower cost to build than conventional rectangular barns. In 1910, the University published Bulletin Number 43 on the economy of the round dairy barn.

In 1912, Chris Gerber was a 24-year-old farmer. Chris decided he needed to build a new barn on his farm eight miles south of Fairbury. Rather than making the traditional rectangular framed barn, Chris elected to go with the latest round barn technology. Chris's barn was 70 feet in diameter and 20 feet to the eaves. It was also equipped with a 12 foot by 42-foot silo in the center of the barn. The round barn that Chris built burned down in March of 1957.

Because of the University of Illinois promoting round barns, some were built all around the state in the 1910 era. The circular design never really became a popular design. The long-term trend of no longer raising livestock negated the need for new barns. Most farmers and their neighbors could easily build a conventional rectangular framed design. It required a lot more skill and effort to make a round versus rectangular structure.

At the same time Chris Gerber was building his round barn; another revolution in technology took place in agriculture. Horses were being replaced by mechanical tractors. Many of those first tractors were behemoths powered by steam engines. Then the technology shifted to smaller tractors powered by internal combustion engines.

For farmers like Chris Gerber, who grew up using horses to power their farm equipment, it was tough to give up their horses. By the late 1930s, horses were quickly being replaced by gasoline-powered tractors. By 1950, there were almost no horses used on farms anymore.

In 1938, after most farmers had given up their horses, Chris Gerber decided not to purchase a tractor. He decided to stretch his old technology of horses as long as possible before buying a tractor. Each year, improvements were made to farm implements, like corn planters. By 1938, all the latest technology planters were designed to be pulled by tractors, not horses. Chris Gerber wanted to keep using his horses, but he wanted a better quality corn planter. Chris modified a new corn planter so horses could pull it instead of a tractor.

Because so few farmers were still using horses in 1938, the Pantagraph decided to write a story about a Cropsey farmer who was still using horses to farm. Chris Gerber and his son Emil Gerber were interviewed for the story. A Pantagraph photographer took pictures of Chris and his son Emil planting their cornfield. The photo shows Emil Gerber riding on the front of the four-row corn planter and driving a team of two horses. Father Chris Gerber is watching the planting operation. The horse-drawn planter was able to plant three acres of corn per hour.

The Pantagraph is working with the McLean County Museum of History on a new project. The Pantagraph is releasing the photo negatives they used for their newspaper stories. The McLean County Museum of History digitizes the images and makes them available for free to the public. The high-quality photographic negative for the story about Chris Gerber still using horses to plan corn in 1938 is one of the images made possible by this project.

Back in 1912, when Chris Gerber was only 24 years old, he chose to use the latest technology when he built a new round barn. By the time Chris Gerber was 50 years old, he decided not to use tractors, the latest technology. Instead, Chris blended the old technology of horses with the newest technology in corn planters. It is always interesting to see how people decide whether or not to use the latest technology available.

Cropsey farmer Chris Gerber watches his son Emil Gerber use two horses to pull a four-row corn planter in 1938.